**Chapter one**

FBI agent Nic Rodriguez reentered his old life undercover, and yet in plain sight, one of many masked pirates partying their way down ritzy Bayshore Boulevard during Tampa’s annual Gasparilla parade. While the pillaging and plundering was all for fun today, the former maid’s son had serious reasons for returning to the place of his greatest joy and his greatest humiliation: the grand Calabrese estate overlooking Tampa Bay and the parade route. His assignment: infiltrate his former *family* suspected of running a mob ring transporting drugs across state lines.

A thunderous boom rattled his bones. His pulse pounded, and his feet literally left the ground.

But only for half a second.

Nic quickly regained his footing. He shook his head trying to laugh it off. After all these years those damn parade float cannons still caught him off guard. Even though he knew they were coming.

*I’m just jumpy today. True, that.*Because, completing his professional assignment could mean his personal mission wouldn’t stand a chance in hell.

Nic pushed his way through the rowdy crowd, grateful for the elbow jabs and shoulder pushes he received. Physical discomfort he could handle. This emotional shit pissed him off. He prided himself on always being logical, analytical, cool under pressure. The perfect FBI man, according to his academy trainer. So far today, he’d been dealing with an upset stomach and sweaty hands. “It’s just another job,” he said to no one. *Not this time.*

He’d been ordered to take this assignment because he’d grown up on the Calabrese estate, playing with the Calabrese kids, even if only in the enclosed back yard where none of their ridiculously rich friends could see them. He knew the family better than just about anyone.

He’d *accepted* the damn assignment for different reasons. First, to get the revenge he’d been dreaming of since he’d been kicked out on his ass over a decade ago, but also to protect his first love, who might also be implicated. He just didn’t know if she was involved, because he hadn’t seen or talked to Carla Calabrese in over ten years.

He had no idea how she’d react when he walked through her front door. That’s why he’d picked today to resurface.

A burly, biker-looking pirate brought a black boot down on his toes. “Shit! Watch it, man.” But the guy didn’t even acknowledge what he’d done. Probably didn’t even hear him over the crowd. Had to be over a hundred thousand people lined up to watch the parade today.

He glanced over to the bay. People were still hanging out in their fishing boats and party yachts, part of the annual watercraft invasion escorting the main pirate ship to the beginning of the parade route. Other people waited on land in lines as thick as thieves, waiting for the pirates to unload and begin the march down Bayshore.

He shaded his eyes from the bright sun and continued pushing his way down the sidewalk, stalling when he got closer to the Jose Gasparilla. The fully-rigged pirate ship had just docked. It was back-lit, making it a dark and menacing presence. A confusing twist of emotions constricted his center. As a kid, he’d been intimidated as hell by this commanding ship, impressed with its high, black masts decorated in multi-colored flags that had rippled wildly in the wind.

Last time he’d been here he’d been shivering and dressed in thin, Goodwill layers during a chilly January morning, knowing he was breaking the rules and would get his skinny assed kicked for sneaking out to see the ship dock. He’d wanted to watch the unruly pirates swagger off onto Bayshore. And it was always worth the risk.

A cloud blocked the sun for a moment. And Nic saw only an aging party vessel full of costumed, middle-aged adults acting like college kids.

He turned his back on the ship. Just like he’d turned his back on his past.

The smell of gunpowder, mixed with sausages, peppers, and fried onion rings, drifted up his nose, further resurrecting recollections. This one of Carla trying her first corndog. The Calabrese chef never made corndogs. Nic had loved them. Carla had too once he’d convinced her to try one. He smiled, remembering how he had licked the mustard off the corner of her mouth. Remembering how she’d blushed when he’d done it. Remembering how his heart had almost stalled, along with his courage. Remembering how he’d finally moved in and kissed her.

The rat-a-tat- tat of an approaching drum line and the whooshing of heavy, rainbow colored beads flying over his head intensified the sensory over load of childhood memories. His heart skipped. *It’s not too late to turn back. You can abort. No one would blame you. You’re too close to this assignment. Too close to those who could be implicated. Too close to losing control.*

Someone shoved past Nic, elbowing him so hard pain shot through his middle, thrusting him back into the present. He sucked in air and scanned the crowd closet to him. No one acting suspicious. No one threatening him. No wary eye balls checking him out. No loaded gun pointed his way. No parade coverage TV cameras on him.

Just men in colorful tunics and loose baggy trousers chasing women in sexy skirts and decorative pirate hats, laughing, drinking, loving life, oblivious to the war of worries going on inside his head. It was a freaking Pirates of the Caribbean reality show out here today. *Good*. That’s exactly what he wanted. To be lost in the rowdy crowd.

A little boy, who couldn’t have been older than five or six, caught his eye. The kid was jumping up and down, trying to see above the crowd. Beads flew over the kid’s head. The boy kept reaching up, but each time a necklace would fly his way, someone taller would grab them. The boy stomped his foot and shoved at the adult in front of him, trying to get through. No one budged. No one even noticed the kid.

Nic moved closer.

His mom had despised Gasparilla. She’d always had to work overtime during the annual Calabrese party, and the whole thing used to wear her out. While she was working, he would sneak out to see the parade, doing exactly as this kid was, trying to push his way up front.

Nic walked over to the boy, and swooped him up, throwing him onto his shoulders.

The boy stiffened at first, probably because his mother had warned him about talking to strangers. But as soon as the beads started whizzing by, the kid started grabbing a stash of his own.

*This is not what you are supposed to be doing.* But, Nic couldn’t help himself. It would have been nice to have a father to lift him onto his shoulders back in the day and help him see the parade all those years ago.

“There you are! Oh, my God, I’ve been looking for you, Anthony.” A woman, with frantic wide eyes and smeared black mascara, pulled at Nic’s arm reaching for the boy.

Nic quickly took the boy off his shoulders and placed him on the sidewalk. The woman smelled of beer and sweat. And fear. “I was just helping him stay above the crowd and get some beads.”

She immediately wrapped her arms around the boy. “I just turned around and he was gone.”

Nic nodded. Most parents wouldn’t dare bring their kids to the adult parade. That’s why Tampa also had a parade just for kids.

“Mommy, look.” The boy wrestled out of his mom’s hold and punched up a fist of multi-colored necklaces. “I got beads! Lots of beads!”

They were dripping over the kid’s chubby fingers. Something in the kid’s sincere smile shifted something deep inside of Nic.

“Anthony, you scared me.” The woman shook her son by the shoulders. “Please, don’t ever do that again.” Then, she pulled him back into her, hugging him fiercely.

The woman looked as if she’d die right there if her son had been hurt or lost. Nic’s heart ached. Mom had had never hugged him like that. No, when he would finally return to the maid’s quarters at the back of the Calabrese estate as the parade wound down, he would get his ass beat, or worse, he’d be ignored by the tired, weary woman who life had hammered down.

“Thank you.” The woman looked at Nic with both gratitude and concern. After all, she didn’t know Nic from Adam. She picked up her son and disappeared into the parade crowd.

Nick turned around, and found himself standing right in front of the walkway leading to the Calabrese mansion.

His mouth went dry.

His skin warmed.

He planted his feet, brought his hands to his hips and stared down the walkway of the estate he once called home. Sort of.

His pulse beat at his temples, making his vision go blurry.

Buzzing filled his ears.

The weight of his history here had his arms and legs feeling heavy. It wasn’t just his conflicted feelings about being here after being tossed out so many years ago, it was also his indecision about taking down Marco Calabrese. Because, to achieve that goal, he might have to hurt Carla. Hell, he might have to arrest her, too, depending on what she’d been doing with her life since he’d last seen her. Last kissed her.  Last …

Nic exhaled, shaking away *that*memory. He took the important first step through the fancy wrought iron gate. The annual party was well underway. The front lawn was littered with lucky people, born with the right  to be here. He’d get lost in that crowd easily thanks to the ridiculous red pantaloons, white, ruffled pirate shirt and mask he’d put on.

*Will Carla recognize me anyway?*

He swallowed. But nothing went down.

*No turning back now.*

*Time to get to work.*